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Zoyah Kinkead-clark

The University of the West Indies, Mona, zkinkeadclark@gmail.com

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SCHOOL READINESS AT THE NEXUS BETWEEN POVERTY AND EDUCATION: THE INSIGHTS OF TWO JAMAICAN TEACHERS

Zoyah Kinkead-Clark

The University of the West Indies, Mona

Abstract: In this article, the role of poverty as a barrier to children's readiness for school is discussed. Using two Jamaican early childhood teachers to illuminate the findings, this piece sought to gain insight into teachers' perspectives about supporting children, who come from impoverished circumstances, to be ready for primary school. Thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed two dominant themes: 1) Teachers need better preparation to meet children's developmental needs, and 2) Unrealistic curriculum expectations perpetuate the knowledge gap. These findings draw attention to some of the challenges teachers face in meeting the needs of children who live in poverty. These challenges have implications for the provision of equitable early childhood opportunities for children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

In developing countries, educational equity and equality cannot be realised without wholly addressing the role of poverty and its insidious impact on communities, families and social institutions. Data suggest that of the one and half billion people who live in poverty, there are twice as many children than adults. Children below four years of age are more susceptible to poverty and as such larger numbers of this cohort are at risk for its plethoric effect (Newhouse, Suárez Becerra & Evans, 2016; Sumner, 2010). The impact of poverty is vicious. For the persons who are classified as "living in poverty", poverty is more than a mere construct. It is a way of life (Sumner, 2010). Poverty reflects their lived experiences and forecasts their life expectancy, maternal health, ability to access health services, educational opportunities, and ability to fulfill their human rights. If intervention is not implemented, it predicts their educational outcomes (Engle & Black, 2008; Sumner, 2010; Wagstaff et al, 2004).

The crippling effects of poverty and its role as "the great divider" has been a ubiquitous obstacle facing many low resource countries. In Jamaica, a country classified as developing, despite robust investments to stem the disparate outcomes between children from lower and upper/middle socioeconomic backgrounds, there still remain significant differences in children's ability to reach their full developmental outcomes (McDonald, 2000; Smith & Ashiabi, 2007; Witter, Hamil, & Spencer, 2009). The figures speak for themselves. Though the numbers are decreasing, research indicates that almost thirty-three percent of Jamaican children under four years of age still live in abject poverty (McDonald, 2000). This means approximately fifty thousand children, who are in a very sensitive period of their development, have to grow up in circumstances that negatively affect their ability to thrive, not only in the near future but the distant as well.

The cyclical nature of poverty reinforces its stifling impact on children's development. For children in the early childhood years this means that they not only stand an increased chance of remaining in poverty well into their adult years, but also that they will most likely perpetuate the cycle, thereby transmitting it to their children as well.

Exploring the link between readiness and poverty

Though data suggest that the greatest impact of poverty is on the developing brain, a plethora of other studies have also noted the other detrimental impacts which have far reaching effects on children's lives (Luby, 2013; Hair et al, 2015). Locally derived research studies, including those of Powell and Grantham-McGregor (1989), Grantham-McGregor et al. (1997), and Walker (2011) have shown that Jamaican children who are born in poverty are at a significant disadvantage, especially when compared to their more economically privileged counterparts. They are greater risk for malnutrition (which may result in stunting or obesity). These children also face an increased chance of early academic failure, exposure to questionable parenting practices, greater risk of

being victims of physical and sexual abuse, and greater risk of exposure to high levels of violence based on the contexts they are forced to reside in (Smith & Ashiabi, 2007; Walker, 2011). Further compounding this is that their parents, who are more likely to be stressed (Barrow & Ince, 2008), may have little time to engage in quality interactions with their child, which research suggests could have implications for their child's cognitive, socio-emotional and psycho-social functioning (Roopnarine, Wang, Krishnakumar, & Davidson, 2014). This puts children at a disadvantage because these are essential skills necessary for academic success and readiness for school (Engle & Black, 2008; Gaskin & Walker, 2003; World Health Organization, 2009; Yoshikawa, Aber & Beardslee, 2012).

School readiness

Readiness for school refers to a reciprocal relationship between the school and the child. In one perspective, it refers to the school's preparedness to meet the needs of children transitioning from other environments and in another regard it refers to the skills, competences and dispositions children have which prepares them to seamlessly transition to school (McDowall Clark, 2017; Early, Pianta, & Cox, 1999; Woodhead & Moss, 2007).

Readiness is particularly important because it sets the tone for how children will manage the requirements expected of them when they transition between spaces. Isaacs (2012), notes that children from impoverished circumstances typically enter school "at a disadvantage" and are therefore less likely to be ready for primary school. Largely poverty impacts school readiness because it is directly related to the availability of financial resources and quality of home/family experiences. These attributes are directly related to the quality of parent-child interactions, vocabulary development, financial resources available to purchase required resources, finances to send children to school, parenting practices and preschool attendance (Perkins, Finegood, & Swain, 2013).

In Jamaica, preschool begins at age three and ends at age five. Despite the fact that the island boasts one of the highest enrollment rates in the Caribbean, findings suggest that less than thirty-three percent of children are ready for primary school. Research indicates that the majority of children who are ill prepared are those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. For children as young as three years, many of them already show signs of frequent absenteeism which has implications for their preparedness for primary school and their potential to successfully complete primary school.

Research aim

The purpose of this article is to give voice to two Jamaican early childhood teachers who teach children transitioning to primary school. This piece aims to gain insight into these teachers' perspectives about supporting children, who come from impoverished circumstances, to be ready for primary school.

Data collection and analysis

This study forms part of a larger research project which examined Jamaican children's readiness for primary school. One of the key goals of the larger project was to understand the differences in teachers' interpretation of readiness. Qualitative methodology was employed to gather the data for this study. This method was specifically selected because it allowed for the generation of detailed, thick and rich descriptions of the subject being explored.

To gather the data thirty-three teachers from both pre-primary (N= 15) and primary schools (N=18) across the island participated in four focus group discussions. Each discussion comprised approximately eight teachers. The overarching goal of the discussions was to unearth the teachers' perspectives regarding children's readiness for primary school and to understand the factors they believed impacted children's readiness. Two teachers were randomly selected to illuminate the findings.

All discussions were recorded and later transcribed. Data were analysed using content analysis. The framework proposed by Stewart and Shamdasani (2014) was followed in order to extract the themes.

Participants

(All names used are pseudonyms in order to ensure the anonymity of the participants.)

The teachers who participated in this study both taught in community operated institutions referred to as basic schools in Jamaica. Ms. James had fourteen years of teaching experience and Mrs. Leon had eight years of

experience. In order to glean their narratives, both teachers were interviewed. Data were analysed thematically to extricate the dominant themes. Two themes were extracted from the data:

1. Teachers need better preparation in order to meet children's developmental needs.
2. Unrealistic curriculum expectations perpetuate the knowledge gap.

Results

Better preparation to meet children's developmental needs

Findings from my interviews indicate that the teachers struggled to cope with meeting the needs of children from impoverished circumstances. Further to this, there was also the belief that schools also had little knowledge or means to support these children. What this meant was that even though they felt incapable of managing, classroom teachers were left to respond intuitively per se by trying to figure out ways to support these children on their own. This had dangerous possibilities because the teachers understood it was not enough and because of this, the children were the ones left to suffer the negative consequences.

Marcilyn James, one of the teachers interviewed, explained:

...it's not just about giving them [children] food and books and school uniforms. These children come to us with so much baggage it would take a lifetime for me to help them.

Remember it's not just one or two...it is usually the majority. Even if I knew how to help them, it would be I would do so at the expense of the other children in the class.

Kayona Leon, the second teacher, expressed a similar position. She stated:

The reality is we were never taught to teach these children. I certainly never learned this in teachers' college. My principal is just as clueless as I am. We may have done one or two special education courses [during my teacher training] but for the most part...I was never taught how to deal with children who have "all these issues". We were taught to refer to Mico Care Centre (Child Assessment Centre) not deal with these issues in the class. The children who I have are too young to go to Mico. Even worse...what am I going to refer them for? I certainly can't refer them because they come from very poor households. In the end, I do the best I can knowing it's not good enough for these children... they end up shortchanged. They go to primary school and then the teachers complain about the poor job I did in preparing them....those [primary school] teachers can't do any better either.

Another common thread through both interviews was teachers' beliefs about how poverty is viewed within the school setting. According to the teachers, there were assumptions that most of the needs of children were predominantly material or tangible. They referred to schools making effort to implement breakfast programmes or raise funds to purchase school resources. The teachers noted that while very important, they did not address the socio-emotional needs the children faced. In this regard, the teachers reiterated the need to provide more training opportunities for teachers and school administrators to meet children's socio-emotional needs.

Unrealistic curriculum expectations perpetuate the knowledge gap

A major finding emerging from the interviews was how teachers perceived the curriculum. In this regard, there was the belief that the content children were expected to master in the curriculum far superseded what the children could actually manage. This they felt resulted in teachers being guided by the curriculum rather than the needs of the children. It should be noted in this regard, curriculum refers to all the planned and unplanned experiences and expectations required of children.

In some sense, the teachers alluded to working in an early years system which seemingly operated by ignoring the realities of the children it ought to serve. There was frequent reference to the fact that assumptions were made about the capabilities of the students and that these were usually based on children who came from more stimulating and wealthier backgrounds.

Kayona explained, "these children...are expected to do so much but they need time. They have so many challenges... yet we expect them to do everything and learn everything at the same pace, at the same time as children from rich families."

Marcilyn expressed similar sentiments. She shared that she has struggled to plan for her students who entered the classroom with so many issues. Some were hungry, some were worried about their home life. She noted that some children in her class would come to school for a few days a month and then she wouldn't see them for weeks. She notes, even if she wanted to spend time to "bring some of these children up to speed" she would face an

uphill battle. She explains that the belief that all children are the same and learn the same way perpetuates the gap between rich and poor children. She notes:

...we have to start from scratch. We cannot take anything for granted. Many of our children do not have the kinds of enriching experiences that other children may have. Many times I think I'm way over my head. Sometimes I want to leave. If not for the children, then I would leave....it's just because I know they need me why I'm still here.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how two teachers (both of whom teach children transitioning to primary school) perceived the role of poverty and its impact on children's readiness for primary school. Two themes emerged from the data: 1) Teachers need better preparation in order to meet children's developmental needs, and 2) Unrealistic curriculum expectations perpetuate the knowledge gap. The findings reveal that teachers believe that while poverty impacts children's readiness for school, the education system itself and the unrealistic expectations of the children perpetuate the gaps that exist between children from poorer backgrounds and those from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds.

For the teachers who participated in this study, not only does poverty have implications for children's ability to access education, but it also has implications for children's ability to benefit fulsomely from their preschool education. This they believe could be improved, if teachers and institutions were provided with the tools to help these children. These findings support those of Hair et al. (2015), who note that improving the outcomes for children who live in poverty can only be done through targeted support including parenting programmes and professional development for educators.

Like McDowall Clark (2017), the teachers were of the belief that because an aspect of readiness refers to the school's preparedness to meet the needs of students, it was incumbent on the school to ensure that staff had the skills to help these children to be ready. If not, then the school should bear some of the responsibility to ensure the necessary arrangements to assist the children. As suggested by Engle (2007) one way to assist children in poverty is to provide parenting programmes whereby parents are taught ways to support their child's development through the creation of warm and supportive environments.

Conclusion and recommendations for future research

As is one of the limitations of qualitative research, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. It is however hoped that these findings will illuminate some of the issues shaping children's readiness for school. While there is no shortage of studies examining the role of poverty of children's development, very few studies have attempted to understand how teachers' views its impact on children's skills and dispositions in the classroom. Though only two teachers were used to illuminate the findings, their perspectives are reflective of the wider group of teachers who participated in the focus group discussions.

These findings not only point to the need to support teachers and, by extension, institutions in ways they can meet the needs of children from challenging circumstances, but they also draw attention to obstacles children face in the classroom.

For many developing countries, investing in the early childhood years is seen as a panacea to social and economic difficulties. The investments, by respective governments, in the early years, have largely been based on the assumption that teachers are fully equipped with the knowledge and competencies to help all children. Though generated from a small scale study, my findings suggest otherwise. Though qualified teachers, both participants admitted they had little knowledge of how to support the needs of children who come from impoverished circumstances. What this may mean is that without intervention, the very education system which has been set up to equalise children's opportunity to reach their full developmental potential may, in fact, perpetuate the inequities that exist between children from lower and those from middle/upper socio-economic backgrounds.

The findings of this study highlight some of the gaps in the research about Jamaican children's readiness for primary school. For instance, very little is known about the exact issues which result in children's lack of preparedness. While some evidence exists about their academic deficiencies, there is a paucity of research that addresses the percentage of children who demonstrate deficiencies in other areas, including socio-emotional maturity and psycho-social competencies.

It is hoped that these findings will spur research about other factors that shape children's readiness for primary school, not just in Jamaica, but in the wider Caribbean as well.

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